

CASA de Maryland ramps up political efforts

By: **Brian Hughes**
Examiner Staff Writer
November 7, 2010

The political wing of CASA de Maryland devoted thousands of dollars this election cycle to push for Hispanic-backed candidates. But some argue the group should stay out of politics while accepting taxpayer money.

CASA in Action, the sister organization run by the state's largest immigration advocacy group, spent \$35,000 this election on phone banks, mailers and door-to-door canvassing across the state.

The group attempted to call every Latino voter, up to three times each, in Montgomery and Prince George's counties and portions of Baltimore City and Carroll County. Members also knocked on the doors of

thousands of Hispanic households in the 20 most Spanish-speaking areas in the region.

"Facing down a stream of xenophobic attacks by Republican candidates, my community responded exactly as they should," said CASA Executive Director Gustavo Torres, who is also the leader of the political organization. "They marched to the power of the vote."

But a growing number of critics say the political efforts interfered with the group's service pursuits.

"What bothers me is there is no break between the Gustavo of CASA de Maryland and the Gustavo of CASA in Action," said Brad Botwin, director of Help Save Maryland, an anti-illegal immigration group. "It's the same exact staff. You can't have any kind of dialogue with them, and this new group makes it even worse."

CASA was previously barred from participating

in political campaigns. But by obtaining 501(c)(4) status under the U.S. tax code, CASA in Action is allowed to participate in political campaigns and elections.

CASA de Maryland will receive nearly \$2.1 million this fiscal year from local governments, including \$1.3 million from Montgomery County, and another \$32,000 in federal money for health outreach and English instruction. CASA in Action has more than 10,000 members -- a tally that has doubled in just a few months -- who pay annual dues of \$25 for membership in both CASA in Action and CASA de Maryland.

"There has been momentum building; my prediction is it will only get stronger," said Montgomery County Councilwoman Nancy Navarro, D-Eastern County. "We definitely saw wider participation among the Latino community this year, and I think CASA played a significant part of that."

CASA endorsed candidates based on their responses to a survey that asked whether they supported giving driver's licenses to illegal immigrants or whether English should be the official state language, among other immigration questions.

Local election officials don't track voting participation by ethnicity, but roughly 15 percent of Montgomery County's 1 million residents and nearly 13 percent of the Prince George's County population are Hispanic, according to census data -- both twice as high as the state average.